DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 419 252 CS 509 833

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TITLE National Presidential Debates: Some Lessons That Could Be Learned from the Competitive Debate Realm.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Communication Association (Chicago, IL, April 2-5, 1998).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Debate; *Debate Format; Higher Education; Models; *Persuasive Discourse; *Political Candidates; *Presidential Campaigns (United States); Public Speaking
IDENTIFIERS *Debate Strategies; Public Discourse

ABSTRACT

This paper is an analysis of how competitive debate organizations have solved many of the criticisms that have been leveled at political and (specifically) presidential debating and, thus, provides models that presidential debates can be patterned after to improve the quality of the debating that is taking place in the political realm. The paper's models suggested for presidential debates are: (1) a more clearly worded debate topic; (2) a more traditional academic debate format; (3) more focus on issues and less on image; and (4) more clearly spelled out rules and judging criteria. The paper elaborates on the benefits of having presidential debates be more like academic debates. (Author/CR)

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ED 419 252

National Presidential Debates: Some Lessons that Could be Learned from the Competitive Debate Realm

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of
the Central States Communication Association,
Chicago, April 1998

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Abstract

National Presidential Debates: Some Lessons that Could be Learned from the Competitive Debate Realm

This paper is an analysis of how competitive debate organizations have solved for many of the criticisms that have been leveled at political and (specifically) presidential debating and, thus, provide models that presidential debates can be patterned after in order to improve the quality of the debating that is taking place in the political realm. In it four ways that presidential debates should be more like those that are conducted in the competitive debate realm are put forth, and the benefits of having presidential debates be more like academic debates are elaborated on.

NATIONAL PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES: SOME LESSONS THAT COULD BE LEARNED FROM THE COMPETITIVE DEBATE REALM

As I was proudly browsing through the initial volume of the Journal of Public Advocacy and thinking to myself how happy I was to be part of a debate organization that stresses the educational value of debate, a television in the background tuned to CNN was proclaiming that the presidential race was "heating up" and the anchors were speculating on whether we would be hearing the two chief candidates "debate head to head in 96". Having just finished a number of articles on how NEDA has dealt with and solved for many of the chief issues that bothered many of those who had become disillusioned with competitive academic debate, my thoughts turned to how much better national presidential debates would be if some or all of the objectives and procedures of academic debate were applied to them. Indeed various communication scholars have commented at different times on such things in national presidential debates as an over-reliance on delivery, use of faulty logic, evidence of poor quality, lack of direct clash, candidates straying from the agreed upon topics, candidates "playing to the media" and lack of a uniform standard for judging who was the superior performer. In this paper it will be shown that these perceived short-comings could be eliminated if presidential debates more closely resembled those debates that are conducted in the academic debate realm. Specifically, four ways that presidential debates should be more like those conducted in the competitive debate realm will be put forth.

1. A More Clearly Worded Debate Topic

The first way the quality of presidential debates could be improved is with the use of clearly worded topics. Unlike academic debates presidential debates are usually open-ended with candidates being able to discuss anything and everything that they can convince the audience is relevant. This was a precedent that was actually established in the first televised presidential debates in 1960 between Senator John Kennedy and then Vice-President Richard Nixon. In his discussion of that debate Windt, (1994) wrote:

> "The candidates wanted only broad topics to be discussed (limited in the first debate to domestic affairs and in the final debate to foreign affairs). They did not (like academic debators) want to debate specific propositions of policy. They won on this decision and set a precedent for future joint appearances by candidates. They would not really debate, either in format or form, but would answer questions from journalists about a wide range of topics."

That only broad topics (like domestic affairs) are discussed often prevents the voters from knowing the positions of the candidates on specific issues. Bostdorff, (1996) says:

> "Debates need independant candidates to apply the heat on issues that the major parties might ignore. Ralph Nader could talk about the environment or Ross Perot could talk about the deficit. If it's just the two major party candidates, they can scoot around the edges of the issues."

Even the large broad topics (such as foreign affairs) can be "scooted around" as John Kennedy showed in his debate with Nixon in 1960. Although the first debate was to center on domestic affairs, Kennedy got around this by saying "if we are weak at

home, we will be weak abroad", and he then proceded to discuss how we were falling dangerously behind the Russians on the world stage. Perhaps the biggest reason that a clearly worded topic is needed in presidential debates, however, is so candidates can employ a long recognized succesful strategy of argumentation-topicality. Without a clearly delineated topic presidential debators have been able to stray from the topic at will and their opponents have been able to do little about it. By being able to argue topicality, however, a candidate will be able to show potential voters why his/her opponent's remarks are irrelevant and, thus, can ask that they be disregarded.

2. A More Traditional Academic Debate Format

The format used in most presidential debates up to this time has been to have the candidates make a joint appearance before and answer questions from journalists or a sample of voters or both. This, of course, is much different from the format used in academic debate where the debators can directly respond to each other and even cross examine one another. So different is the format that has been used for presidential debates that Auer, (1962) referred to them as the "counterfeit debates". He says that what we call presidential debates "are actually joint press conferences with a little debating thrown in for good measure." This difference in format greatly affects what happens during the debate and can even have an impact on who the voting public feels is the eventual "winner". One way that this happens is that candidates are not always asked the

same questions. So they do not get to (or have to) respond to the same issues. For example, in the 1988 presidential debate between Republican candidate George Bush and Democratic challenger Michael Dukakis, a journalist asked Dukakis about his responsibility in the Willie Horton case. Willie Horton is, of course, the now notorious convicted murderer who raped and killed while participating in Massachusett's furlough program. What is interesting, however, is that no one asked Mr. Bush about the responsibility he felt for the high number of federal convicts who committed crimes while out on furlough in the federal program which was directly under Mr. Bush's control. Ryan (1994) wrote in his analysis of these presidential debates that "the Willie Horton question was really a loaded one and was most damaging to Dukakis." He went on to say that "it established a notion in the voter's minds that carried on for much longer than the debates themselves--the notion that the Democrats, in general, and Dukakis, in particular, would be soft on crime." Because of the format Bush didn't have to answer questions on the federal furlough program, and thus did not suffer the political misfortune that Dukakis did. Had these debators been allowed to refute and question each other directly things might have turned out differently. Bostdorff (1996) says:

> "To fully inform voters I would like to see a real debate with candidates given more time to directly refute each other and even a chance to cross examine each other. It would also be better if there were third and fourth party candidates in the mix."

With the recently used presidential debate formats there is

some time allowed for direct refutation of the oppossing candidate. The problem, as Bostdorff above states is that it just isn't enough. How much refutation can really be done in a one minute response? And, there has been no opportunity at all for one candidate to question the other. Thus, using a format that more closely resembles that which is used in intercollegiate debating would not only improve the quality of the debating that takes place, but would also be more fair as well.

3. More Focus on Issues and Less on Image

In academic debate the stock issues that must be won in order for a particular debator or team to prevail are widely known. After all, how many of us have been told in a debate round that a team has won a particular issue and "this is a VOTER." As a result, debators and teams make sure that they argue those issues that they must win according to argumentation theory and their debate association's rules and guidelines. In presidential debates, however, this isn't the case. There are no certain issues that must be addressed (such as the stock issues of ill, blame, cure and cost in propositions of policy), and this frees the candidates to focus more on their images. Moore and Fraser, (1977) wrote the following about the candidates attempts to play on images at the expense of issues:

> "Issues really play a minor role in presidential campaigns. This is because "winning the war" (getting elected) is much more important than winning a single battle (winning a single debate). No one is going to forfeit the war just to win a battle."

Moore and Fraser, (1977) go on to say that there are several

reasons for this - the least of which isn't that voters don't entirely trust what candidates say to them and prefer, instead, to "get a general feel for how capable and reliable a given candidate seems to be." (Berquist, (1994) claims that another reason is that voters simply aren't skilled enough in debate and argumentation to make a ruling on which candidate has won crucial issues. He states:

> "Most American television viewers are not expert in argumentation, skillfull in following an extended argument or adept at judging the precise merits of a debator's case. Thus, speaker image becomes central to the assessment of viewer response. So central in fact that one can say in 1976 it was THE issue in the campaign. It was the one and only criterion that every American voter felt qualified to apply."

Berquist goes on to say that Carter knew this and deliberately tried to stay away from arguing specific issues. (Glad, 1980) quotes him as saying the following in a Playboy interview:

> "I don't give a damn about abortion, or amnesty or right to work laws. They're impossible political issues. In fifty years people will still be arguing about them and they won't be any closer to resolving them than they are now. I can't possibly help anyone - including myself if I'm out on the edge of such volatile things, and I don't intend to be. It would be foolish. If I'm going to lose, it's not going to be because I staked my whole candidacy on a ban on abortions or the right to have them. That's not how it works. The only candidates that I've known who have emphasized issues are Dewey, Goldwater and McGovern, and we all know what happened to them."

Even granting that the above is true (and it's certainly a debatable issue) what does this say about the quality of argument in presidential debates? Would not this complete place of emphasis on image and delivery be a form of modern day sophistry? What would Aristotle, Protagorous and Toulmin have to say about

this style of "debating"? Also, I personally disagree that the American voter is unable to follow arguments on the issues. Isn't this what Plato tried to say when he suggested that men were unsuited to govern themselves and, thus, should be ruled by philosopher kings? Perhaps all that is needed are for more persons to take courses in our discipline and become more skilled at argumentation and debate. (Bostdorff, 1996) writes that "already voters are probably alot more qualified than we are giving them credit for." Forcing candidates to address real issues rather than just working to promote favorable images would lend more substance to presidential debates and would give voters more information that they could use to make more informed voting decisions.

4. More Clearly Spelled Out Rules and Judging Criteria

In academic debate there are certain rules and expectations that debators must meet if they are to win each given debate round and clearly spelled out penalties for debators that fail to follow those rules and/or meet those expectations. For example in a National Educational Debate Association debate round it is widely known that the issue of topicality must be raised in the first negative constructive speech. After that the judge is to be asked for a ruling, and if he/she declares the affirmative's case to be topical the negative team is to refrain from arguing topicality for the rest of that round. Teams failing to abide by this rule can be penalized severely, including being given an "automatic loss". However, in

presidential debates the rules and the criteria for judging are not usually as clearly spelled out. (Windt, 1960) states that "numerous scholars have written that Kennedy failed to present a prima facie case in his opening remarks in the first debate in 1960." "Nevertheless," he says, "people gave Kennedy the decision in that debate by a nearly two to one margin." Had this happened in an actual academic debate, however, where rules clearly stipulate that a prima facie case must be presented Kennedy might have been given a loss after his opening speech- without Nixon's even having to respond. (Hahn, 1994) wrote that Bill Clinton, too, in his debate with Bush and Perot in 1992 failed to be prima facie in his attack on the Bush Presidency. Again, Hahn says this had little effect on the outcome in most of the American voter's minds. Clinton was Hahn writes "the clear and convincing winner." With more clearly defined rules and more uniform judging standards the quality of debating in presidential debates can only be improved. Instances such as Kennedy stressing the threat of communism to world peace in the first debate in 1960 when the topic was supposed to be limited to domestic affairs could be dealt with and the candidate penalized for straying from the rules. By making sure both candidates abide by previously agreed upon rules, fairness in presidential debates would be ensured.

Presidential debates have become more high level media entertainment than a serious discussion of pertinent political issues. Candidates have become more concerned with image and

the media with ratings. However, in a democracy such as ours where deliberations about the issues confronting the country are necessary for effective government, conducting presidential debates more like competitive academic debates is an idea that contains much merit.

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